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ABSTRACT

Alternative work schedules can help parents of young children. They are also attractive to students, older workers, handicapped persons, couples desiring to share work and home responsibilities, persons wishing to upgrade skills or switch careers through a return to school, and employers needing to serve the public outside the traditional workday, wanting to use their capital more intensively, or hoping to benefit by reducing absenteeism. Flexitime is an alternative work-time pattern that allows employees to vary their arrival and/or departure times. Experimental approaches allow employees to vary work schedules over the year. A compressed work schedule is one that enables a full-time employee to work the equivalent of a full week in less than five full days. Job sharing refers to the accomplishment of one full-time job by two or more persons, each working part-time. The predominant alternative work schedule for women is part-time work. Temporary work allows flexibility in scheduling while at the same time providing a variety of both work and training experiences. (YLB)

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Facts on U.S. Working Women

U.S. Department of Labor
Women's Bureau

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ALTERNATIVE WORK PATTERNS

General

Significant changes in the composition of the work force, beginning in the 1970's, have been creating stronger demand for alternatives to traditional work schedules. Among them are: (1) more families with young children and both husband and wife working and (2) more single women and men maintaining families with dependents at home. In 1985, 60 percent of mothers with children ages 3 to 5 and 50 percent of mothers with children under 3 were in the labor force. And in 51 percent of married couple families with children under 6, both parents were working.

Alternative work schedules can help not only parents of young children but also students, older workers, handicapped persons, couples desiring to share work and home responsibilities, and persons who wish to upgrade skills or switch careers through a return to school. Alternative work schedules can also help employers who want or need to serve the public outside the traditional workday or workweek; want to utilize their capital more intensively; or hope to benefit by attracting new workers, improving employee morale and productivity, and reducing absenteeism.

Flexitime

Flexitime is an alternative work-time pattern that allows employees to vary their arrival and/or departure times. This arrangement can bring about variations in the length of the workday and, where permitted by law, in the length of the workweek. According to a supplement to the May 1985 Current Population Survey, 13 percent of female and 14 percent of male wage and salary workers were on flexitime or some other schedule that allowed them to vary the time they begin and end work.

Flexitime sometimes improves employee morale, eases commuting, enhances recruitment, and reduces absenteeism, tardiness, and turnover. Flexitime, however, may make management more difficult and may weaken internal communication.

Variations of flexitime schedules include:

Flexitour - Employees may preselect their daily starting time and change to a new schedule at specified intervals.

Modified flexitour - Employees may modify their daily starting time without regard for intervals.

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Gliding schedule - Within specified time periods, employees may vary their starting and departure times from day to day, e.g., 7:00-9:00 a.m. and 3:00-6:00 p.m.

Variable day - Employees may vary the length of the workday as long as they are present for a predetermined core period.

Variable week - Employees may vary the length of the day and the workweek as long as they are present for the core period and work at least the required number of hours biweekly.

The Federal Employees Flexible and Compressed Work Schedules Act of 1978 made it possible, on a temporary, experimental basis, for Federal agencies to allow employees to choose to work more than 8 hours per day and/or 40 hours per week without paying them overtime, in exchange for granting employees scheduling flexibility. Federal agencies continued to provide premium time-and-a-half pay when they required employees to work overtime. Subsequent legislation permanently authorized the use of flexible and compressed work schedules by Federal agencies (Public Law 99-196, signed December 23, 1985).

The Department of Defense Authorization Act signed in 1985 eliminated the requirement that Federal Government contractors provide premium pay for work in excess of 8 hours per day. All private employers must now provide premium pay only for work in excess of 40 hours per week, as provided in the Fair Labor Standards Act. The change makes it possible for Federal contractors to institute flexible work schedules.

Flexibility Over the Work Year

Experimental approaches to varying work schedules over the year include allowing employees to (1) plan work for an entire year and receive their compensation prorated over 12 months (in Europe) or (2) reduce their schedules (and salaries) within certain percentages in the form of a shorter workday or workweek, blocks of time off, or intermittent time off.

Compressed Work Schedules

A compressed work schedule is any schedule enabling a full-time employee to work the equivalent of a full week in less than 5 full days; the most common compressed schedule is the 4-day week, but a 3-day week is also possible.

Like flexitime, compressed workweeks can enhance employee recruitment, reduce tardiness and turnover, and ease employee commuting. On the other hand, compressed workweeks may make management more difficult and weaken both internal and external communication. The schedules may also induce fatigue.

According to a supplement to the May 1985 Current Population Survey, 2.9 million full-time workers reported workweeks of either 3, 4, or 4 1/2 days. The proportion of full-time wage and salary employees on a

compressed workweek schedule rose from 1.7 to 3.9 percent between May 1973 and May 1985.

As of May 1985, compressed workweeks were most common among workers in service industries, transportation, and material moving occupations.

Job Sharing

Job sharing refers to the accomplishment of one full-time job by two or occasionally more persons, each working part-time. It differs from work sharing, which is a means of avoiding layoffs by shortening the workweek for all employees in an organization. Employees who are job sharing may perform all elements of the work or divide the tasks, depending on the skills and expertise of the sharers and the sophistication of the job. Employees may alternate days or weeks or may split days. Shared jobs may be converted or created.

Although job sharing is believed to involve less than one percent of the work force, it has been widely used by teachers, librarians, receptionists, and health care professionals. Job sharing also exists in such diverse jobs as administrator, clerical worker, physician, laboratory technician, engineer, researcher, bank teller, auditor, and food service worker.

Part-Time Work

The predominant alternative work schedule for women is part-time work. About one-fifth of working women choose part-time schedules. The Bureau of Labor Statistics considers a person who works less than 35 hours a week a part-time worker. The voluntary, part-time labor force of workers ages 20 years and up has increased 48 percent from 8.3 million in 1970 to 12.3 million in 1985. During that period women made up almost three-fourths of the part-time labor force each year. Wives living with their husbands constitute the largest portion of women working part time, 60 percent in 1985.

Women choose part-time work for various reasons. Many want time for family responsibilities, to keep work skills up to date, to facilitate a later transition to full-time work, to broaden interests outside the home, or to supplement family income. Some are students who need to meet expenses and also obtain valuable work experience. Many have a desire for more leisure time. However, part-time work tends to be low-paid with few, if any, fringe benefits.

Part-time workers give employers flexibility in fitting the work force to the workload, such as in responding to uneven demands during peak periods. They provide backup to the full-time staff, particularly where business is not limited to an 8-hour day, 5-day week, such as in retail establishments. Part-time employment also reduces overtime, straight wage costs, and unit labor costs.

Temporary Work

Temporary work allows flexibility in scheduling while at the same time providing a variety of both work and training experiences. It can be

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useful for people entering the work force for the first time, as a stop-gap measure for those seeking permanent employment, or for retraining persons reentering the work force. Today, temporary work accounts for 1 of every 13 new jobs.

Employers use temporary help to: avoid hiring and then laying off permanent employees, contain costs, eliminate some training and advancement expenses as well as benefits costs, meet peak load needs, maintain use of equipment while regular employees are on leave, achieve maximum flexibility in scheduling work, accommodate one-time projects or specialized work, and aid permanent recruiting.

Many workers turn to temporary employment agencies in order to arrange flexible work schedules; some agencies also provide fringe benefits. The temporary help industry, although relatively small, is among the five fastest growing industries in the country. Rapid growth is expected to continue through the mid-1990's--from agency employment of 695,000 in 1985 to almost 1,060,000 by 1995.

Resources

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New Ways to Work (work resource center), 149 Ninth Street, San Francisco, CA, 94103, (415) 552-1000.